

America's First Response to Terrorism:

The Barbary Pirates and the Tripolitan War of 1801

Colonel Bradley E. Smith, U.S. Army

There is but one language which can be held to these people, and this is terror.—General William Eaton, 1799¹

The people that Eaton refers to were Barbary pirates, arguably the first international terrorists the United States ever faced. In 1785 they seized a U.S. merchant ship and 21 crewmen, initiating events that would lead to America's first war on terrorism—the Tripolitan War of 1801.²

The challenges we are confronting today are much the same as those we faced in 1785. The decisions our leaders make and the actions the United States takes are likely to have far-reaching consequences that will affect this country and the world for many years. By examining how the U.S. dealt with Barbary terrorists and the North African governments that sponsored them, we might gain insight into how best to implement U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East today. It is as true today as it was over 200 years ago that the United States could win an overwhelming military victory and yet fail to secure a lasting peace. While the geopolitical stage has changed significantly, with nations realigning along different cultural and economic lines, the Tripolitan War still presents lessons to heed to avoid repeating past errors.

Synopsis of the Tripolitan War

Before 1776, American merchant vessels sailed the Mediterranean under the protective umbrella of Great Britain, which paid annual tribute to the Barbary pirates for herself and her colonies. However, in 1785, when pirates seized their first U.S. ship, the newly independent nation was on her own with no help from Great Britain, no money to pay extortion, and no Navy to intervene.³

President George Washington and Congress attempted to negotiate with the governments of Morocco, Algiers (Algeria), Tunis (Tunisia), and Tripoli (Libya), which sponsored the pirates, but the talks went nowhere and, over the next 10 years,

pirates seized 11 more U.S. vessels and 126 sailors. Finally, in 1795, our fledgling nation succumbed to the terrorists' tactics and began paying tribute in the form of cash and yearly gifts of naval equipment.⁴ Congress appropriated approximately a million dollars in today's currency to secure the release of the original 21 hostages and later agreed to pay another \$11.7 million and surrender yearly gifts of naval equipment valued at nearly half a million. Great public debate ensued over how to handle the situation, and the country was far from united about whether to pay or go to war. President John Adams and Congress preferred negotiations to the expense of building a navy.⁵

By the time Thomas Jefferson became president, the United States had paid sponsoring rogue nations a sum exceeding 20 percent of its annual tax revenue.⁶ Still, the terrorists wanted more. In 1800, after the Dey of Algiers intimidated the captain of the USS *George Washington* into sailing under Algerian colors to Constantinople with booty for the Turkish sultan, the American public had finally had enough.⁷ The popular phrase "millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute" became the Nation's battle cry.⁸ Soon after, in 1801, the Bashaw of Tripoli demanded even more money, and when Jefferson refused to pay, Tripoli declared war and seized the U.S. consulate.⁹ This time the United States fought back by successfully blockading Tripoli, but the war was far from decided.

The frigate USS *Philadelphia* ran aground off Tripoli and was captured by pirates.¹⁰ This setback shocked the Nation much as Pearl Harbor did in 1941. One warship was a significant portion of our tiny naval power at the time. The American public was soon elated with the news of a daring raid. Navy Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and his men rowed into Tripoli harbor, boarded the *Philadelphia* by force, burned her at anchor to prevent her from being used against us, and escaped safely. Decatur's feat electrified the Nation, and popular support for the war soared to an all time high.¹¹

Eaton, the first American consul at Tripoli, convinced Jefferson to allow him to lead an overland expedition to defeat the Tripolitans. Eaton patched together a military force in Egypt composed of several hundred Arabs, 24 Greeks, 8 U.S. marines, and a former Army officer (who led the campaign). The force crossed 600 miles of desert to the “shores of Tripoli,” as recited in the Marine Corps hymn, and captured Derna, Tripoli’s second-largest city. Eaton had attacked the enemy’s primary source of strength, its center of gravity, by seizing land-based logistical hubs that supplied pirate ships. Meanwhile, a U.S. Navy squadron tightened the blockade on Tripoli, and the bashaw was soon ready to deal.¹²

The military victory at Tripoli aroused American passions, united the Nation, and bolstered its bargaining power. But rather than prosecute the war further, Jefferson chose to cut military spending and eliminate the Federal debt. In 1805 he struck a deal with Tripoli, exchanging prisoners and paying one last installment (equivalent to nearly a million of today’s dollars) while allowing the bashaw to remain in power.¹³

By all appearances the United States had won the war, but the country continued to struggle for years afterward with the North African governments that partnered with the extortionists. In 1812, while U.S. military forces were committed elsewhere against the British, the Barbary pirates captured another U.S. merchant ship and enslaved its crew. The pirates continued to raid U.S. ships, extort money, practice blackmail, force prisoners to convert to Islam by threat of death, and hold hostages for ransom. After the War of 1812, President James Madison’s request for a declaration of war against Algeria was granted. U.S. gunboats returned to the Mediterranean and quickly subdued Algeria. By 1815, Tunis and Tripoli also crumbled to U.S. demands.¹⁴

The Tripolitan conflict spanned three decades and four presidents. Terrorism on the high seas might have continued longer had European powers not conquered North Africa and installed regimes supportive of European interests. The English and Dutch ceased tribute payments and attacked Algeria. France annexed Algeria in 1830 and turned Tunis and Morocco into French protectorates. Italy forcibly colonized Tripoli.¹⁵ Pirate dens were eradicated and local support prevented. While colonization provided the final solution to the Barbary pirate problem, it created an entirely new set of socioeconomic and political problems that would plague the West for generations.

Comparisons to the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)

Like the Barbary pirates, Al Qaeda terrorists initially viewed the United States with contempt. In almost 10 years, the terrorists attacked U.S. targets—the World Trade Center (1993); Khobar Towers, Saudi Arabia (1996); American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998); and the USS *Cole* (2000)—with little fear of retribution. The failure to retaliate only precipitated more aggression. The terrorists saw the United States as a paper tiger. They felt safe inside the caves of Afghanistan and under the protection of their benefactor states. Like the overconfident Barbary pirates who terrorized the greatest world powers of their time, Al Qaeda leaders were confident that tactics successfully employed for generations against the British and Soviets would also be effective against Americans.

The situations in North Africa in the 1800s and in Afghanistan and Iraq in this century also demonstrate that within months a resolute stand against terrorism can achieve highly visible results. But, in both wars successfully ending major military operations did not secure political victory or signal the beginning of a lasting peace. The United States must not focus so closely on the battle at hand and maintaining tactical momentum that it overlooks opportunities to seize strategic initiative. To win the war, we must destroy the terrorists’ center of gravity—their growing popular support throughout the Islamic world—while continuing to protect our own center of gravity—the national will.

Maintaining the national will. With the memories and motivations of 9/11 fading, voters have increasingly scrutinized the use of combat power. They have become sensitive to the tremendous financial and human costs of war. Our leaders must rally public support and sustain the Nation’s will for the long, arduous times ahead. One way to do that is to give the people a say in the decision to go to war. Congressional declarations directly reflect the national will. If made and signed into law by the president, a declaration will commit the Nation fully to the war effort; we will be more likely to stay the course for total victory and lasting peace.

Presidents have not always asked for declarations of war before sending troops to battle. Jefferson did not in 1801, and it is no coincidence that warships had to return to the Mediterranean a decade later. In Korea during the 1950s and in Vietnam in the 1960s, the country fought “police actions” without formal congressional approval. Because public approval was not obtained prior to committing troops, over time the conflicts became highly contentious. Of course,



Burning of the frigate Philadelphia in the Harbor of Tripoli, 16 February 1804.

formal declarations of war will not by themselves sustain the national will throughout a protracted conflict, but they can rally the country by giving each citizen a stake in the war's successful prosecution.

An official declaration of war is a risky political undertaking. A president who presents his vision for public scrutiny could fail to win congressional approval, or his efforts might be undercut by a lukewarm response. Nevertheless, to proceed without a public mandate is folly. Past presidents gambled on winning before popular support could erode, but when military tactics did not succeed as anticipated, the toll on national unity was heavy.

Winning the peace and rebuilding a country take time, during which the American public slowly loses interest. Even if all goes according to plan, public reaction is unpredictable. The shock and awe campaign in Iraq proceeded more quickly than the German blitzkriegs of World War II. Rates of advance were the fastest of any land campaign in the history of warfare, yet the media touted the slightest operational pause as a harbinger of doom. Impressions and appearances affect public opinion, which must be heeded because it affects critical strategic decisions. Congress, with its financial power over all military endeavors, ultimately follows the will of the people.

As we plan new campaigns for the GWOT, our civilian leaders will undoubtedly remain focused on prevailing public opinion. Gaining popular consent and then correctly assessing popular

resolve to complete the mission are crucial before committing troops.

Destruction and isolation of Al Qaeda. The United States has successfully pursued two strategies to defeat Al Qaeda and protect Americans at home and abroad. First, coalition militaries have targeted terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Second, intelligence agencies have identified governments that support terrorism openly or covertly, and the President has dealt with them accordingly. Al Qaeda operatives benefit from foreign financial institutions, charities, and other nongovernmental organizations to build training bases and safe havens from which to operate. The United States and its allies are working with foreign governments to tighten internal controls, seize assets, and arrest suspects. The goal of both strategies is to isolate terrorists, eliminate the threat, and destroy their support infrastructure.

The United States should maintain its longstanding policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists. This isolates them further and protects us from an embarrassing diplomatic doublecross. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison did not communicate with terrorists. Instead, they had to deal with the North African governments that sponsored terrorism. That rationale is just as valid today. Al Qaeda is not interested in negotiating settlements, only in destroying the Western way of life.

Gaining the cooperation of foreign governments and peoples is an essential part of our strategy.

Brute force alone cannot sway hostile populations that aid and abet our enemies, but it can gain the adversary's attention. Before the Tripolitan War, diplomatic negotiations with North Africa were daunting for a young nation. Heads of state would not even talk with American envoys until the U.S. fleet arrived offshore. Two hundred years later, military action was necessary to force Afghanistan and Iraq into compliance, but unless we follow up with less threatening strategies to achieve our foreign policy goals, accomplishments on the battlefield will go for naught. Our adversaries will simply wait for the opportunity to strike back. The military successes from 1801 to 1805 were obsolete by 1812. In today's battle, it has yet to be seen whether we can secure our final objective of a lasting peace by moving beyond the tactical campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Winning Over Islam

As long as it enjoys the popular support of Muslims worldwide, Al Qaeda will find ways to reconstitute, and we will not be able to wipe it out. Perceived legitimacy enables terrorists to gather resources and rebuild infrastructure. Al Qaeda's popularity and "legitimacy" have grown significantly over the last decade as it has stepped up anti-Western activities. Terrorist cells continue to emerge unabated. The West will exhaust itself if it must continuously react to new and changing threats worldwide. We must address the root of Al Qaeda's success and wrest strategic initiative from the organization by winning the hearts and minds of its Islamic brethren.

To achieve lasting peace, we must gain greater acceptance among mainstream Muslims. We must do whatever it takes to destroy Al Qaeda's reputation so that increasing numbers of respectable Muslims around the globe do not see its members as heroes. We must find ways to stanch terrorist recruitment. To annihilate Al Qaeda, we must end its grassroots support. It takes time and tremendous effort to change the way people think. This is the defining task in the latest war on terrorism. We must be patient.

Increasing numbers of Muslims worldwide see Western culture as at odds with Islam, but fundamental religious differences have always existed. Even the Barbary pirates, who were not ideological zealots, believed the Koran justified forced religious conversion and other crimes against non-Muslims. Today we hear similar rhetoric from leaders of terrorist organizations. They chant a litany of complaints and accusations about the West's hostile nature. Muslims speak of European

colonialism as if it occurred only yesterday and claim an imperialist United States invaded Iraq to seize oil. Many Arabs do not want American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia, home of Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam. They even criticize the West's peacekeeping measures in the Balkans as discriminating against Bosnian Muslims. American lifestyles are lightning rods for dissent. To make our public image makeover even more challenging, our liberties, high standards of living, and superpower status are the envy of the world and foment jealousies.

Emerging post-Cold War threats to our way of life require adaptive thinking. Heads of state should do as Jefferson did 200 years ago—think originally and listen carefully for signals from the international community that indicate willingness to pursue new strategies. Jefferson put aside fickle public passion, focused on the Nation's long-term interests, promoted public interest in and awareness about the war, and thereby sustained the national will while working through the toughest challenges. He did not seek short-term political gains at the expense of larger issues. Today, we will convince the world's Islamic peoples of our sincerity only by compiling a track record of policies that do not unwittingly drive mainstream Muslims into the enemy camp.

Some Western powers are striving to appear less threatening to Arab cultures. For instance, the coalition has moved swiftly to establish Iraqi self-rule that will suppress perception of it (the coalition) as an occupying force. Still, the Arab media will likely snipe until peace is achieved and ground forces withdrawn. Actions speak for themselves, and no amount of public relations rhetoric will substitute for the real thing. As we learned in North Africa after the Tri-politan War, the United States can and should remain engaged in the region without a continuous military presence. Expanding the nonthreatening aspects of President George W. Bush's strategy to other Islamic countries would be advantageous to the West.

The United States also should join other Western nations to promote what is good about Western culture. We must carry our message directly to the rest of the world. Public relations campaigns must be creative to reach the masses and build goodwill. To ensure we meet our objective, we must strive to circumvent host nations' information filters and controls in a manner that cannot be construed as breaching their sovereignty.

The U.S. Information Agency and Voice of America must continue to spread information about

democracy to every corner of the Islamic World. Instead of attempting to influence state-run media, our public and private sectors must find new ways to give us a competitive edge over terrorist propaganda and lessen the friction between cultures. Music and poetry, so influential in Islamic culture, might be fertile ground for exploration. Pro-Western sentiments might emerge through contests, education programs, and scholarships. Businesses in the free world could be given tax incentives to underwrite the creation of pro-Western media.

Radical fringe elements feed on ignorance and use oppression and intimidation to keep their followers loyal. By improving education and Internet availability in Muslim countries, the West can eliminate the resentment and hostility that breed religious and political extremism. Freethinking, educated people are difficult for anyone to control. Therefore, we must get our message through so people can decide for themselves.

Foreign aid is one method of communicating our message to people of other lands, but it is an over-rated one. Cash payments and other liquid assets can be diverted to purposes other than those originally intended. While foreign aid might woo foreign leaders into our camp, it does not change what people think at the grassroots level. To do that, foreign aid should be clearly discernable as originating from the United States or its allies. It must go directly to its intended recipients in a form the people need rather than what their governments desire. Even then, goodwill might not translate into significant pro-Western sentiment. Foreign aid can only reinforce an

impression already shaped by actual foreign policy accomplishments. Deeds, not words or gifts, generate the most public respect.

The West's reputation in the Islamic world depends largely on foreign policies that refrain from intervening in the affairs of Muslim nations. To avoid being viewed as overbearing or paternalistic, the West must stay out of conflicts between rival Muslim nations. Intervention will breed hatred, fan the fires of jealousy, and counter long-term diplomatic efforts to enhance our standing in the international community. Washington's 1796 warning to beware of foreign entanglements was still fresh on the minds of Americans at the time of the Tripolitan War. Today, we must heed that advice and maintain balance in foreign affairs.

Cinching Victory

In the early 1800s the United States used military force exclusively to handle the North African terrorist threat. Pirates and their government sponsors were beaten into submission, but as a nation we never addressed the associated diplomatic, cultural, and social problems. Consequently, we achieved no lasting peace and had to fight a second time. We still have terrorist problems in that part of the world, most notably in Libya and Algeria. Carl von Clausewitz's dictum, "In war the result is never final," might have applied to the Tripolitan conflict, but we are not doomed to repeat 19th-century history.¹⁶ The measures we take now can win the support of Muslims worldwide, annihilate Al Qaeda, and achieve lasting peace. **MR**

NOTES

1. Louis B. Wright and Julia H. MacLeod, *The First Americans in North Africa: William Eaton's Struggle for a Vigorous Policy Against the Barbary Pirates, 1799-1805* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 41.

2. Gardner W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965), 13-15.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Henry Castor, *The Tripolitan War, 1801-1805* (New York: Franklin-Watts, 1971), 10.

5. Wright and MacLeod, 25. Congress appropriated \$54,000 (more than one million in 2005 dollars) to secure the release of the original 21 hostages and later agreed to pay \$643,500 (\$12 million in 2005 dollars) and surrender yearly gifts of naval equipment valued at \$22,000 (more than \$400,000 in 2005 dollars).

6. Castor, 21; Wright and MacLeod, 25. By the time Thomas Jefferson became president, the United States had paid over \$2 million (\$30 million in 2005 dollars) to rogue nations sponsoring the Barbary pirates.

7. Francis R. Rodd, *General William Eaton: The Failure of an Idea* (New York: Minton, Balch, and Company, 1932), 44-45.

8. Lewis Lord, "Pirates!" *U.S. News and World Report* (25 February 2002): 49.

9. Castor, 20-21.

10. Wright and MacLeod, 135-39.

11. Glenn Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), 265-84.

12. Charles L. Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 77-78.

13. *Ibid.*, 78-79. The last installment Jefferson paid to the pirates was \$60,000 (almost \$1,000,000 in 2005 dollars).

14. Allen, 281, 285-89; Lewis, 160-64; Tucker, 431.

15. Lord, 50.

16. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973): 80.

Colonel Bradley E. Smith, U.S. Army, is Chief, Joint Operations Division, U.S. Transportation Command, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. He received a B.S. from Washington & Lee University, an M.S. from the University of Southern California, an M.S. from the National Defense University, and is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, School of Advanced Military Studies. He has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Haiti, and Germany. His articles "Sealift: Balancing Strategy and Capability" and "Maritime Challenges to Sustaining the Force" appeared in the July-August 1988 and September-October 1989 issues of Military Review.